

Obituary



In Memoriam | Ralf Långbacka (1932-2022)

It is with great sadness that the center for ITI Finland must share the news of the passing of Ralf Långbacka, renowned theatre director and chairman of the Finnish ITI center from 1983 to 1996. As the chairman of ITI Finland, Långbacka oversaw among other things the ITI World Congress held in Helsinki in 1989, as well as the international ballet competitions in Helsinki in 1984 and 1991, sanctioned by the International Dance Committee of the ITI.

Ralf Långbacka first became acquainted with the theatre of Bertolt Brecht while living in postwar Berlin and Munich as a young student. The performances at Berliner Ensemble and Komische Oper Berlin had a profound effect on his view on theatre. He directed numerous productions of Shakespeare, Büchner, Chekhov and Brecht throughout his career, and geared towards dialectical realism as a director, away from psychological realism and its illusionism. For Långbacka classical plays were a means through which he could comment on the questions arising in contemporary society and discuss them. As he once wrote, “Each era has to create its own realism”.

Långbacka often stated that, “Realism is not a style, but a way in which to understand the world”. He wrote theoretical texts on Brecht in the 1960s in which he sought to clarify Brecht’s intentions. However, towards the end of the 1960s Långbacka was considered a radical director who fought for change, and the doors of the institutional theatres in Finland began to close on him. As a Swedish speaker, he found new opportunities in Sweden, directing several important productions. He became known for his incredible work ethic, tenacity and his Don Quixote-like belief that fights with large institutions could be won. With productions such as *Marat/Sade* for the city theatre of Gothenburg Långbacka pointed the way for a new artistic theatre in Sweden, as he had done in Finland. His production of

Mr Puntila and his Man Matti was the first foreign version of a Brecht play (written in collaboration with Hella Wuolijoki) that was invited to the Berliner Ensemble.

He returned to Finland to become artistic director of the Turku city theatre with fellow director Kalle Holmberg. Their reign from 1971 to 1977 became known as the “era of the eagles”, for their numerous public and critical successes. Långbacka and Holmberg showed how the repertoires of institutional theatres could be renewed, how theatrical expression could be developed and the artistic bar raised, as well as how the stage and the house could be brought together.

Later, opera became his passion, and he gave new life to many of its classics in Finland, as well as elsewhere in Europe, North and South America and China.

In the 1990s Långbacka found new fame with productions at a newly established theatre group in Helsinki, Viirus. His production of *As you Like It* was a return to the aesthetics of poor theatre and the ethos of folk theatre, full of play, untampered joy, physicality, and poetry.

For Långbacka the ethos of his work was to enable productions by collaborative ensembles with mutual goals. He will be sorely missed by friends and colleagues all over the world.

You may send your condolences to the family of Ralf Långbacka through the Finnish ITI center. They will be forwarded immediately to the family. Email [tinfo\(at\)tinfo.fi](mailto:tinfo(at)tinfo.fi).

Photo: Kurt-Erik Långbacka